

Marine Mammals Committee

Committee Members: D. Allen, R. L. Brownell, Jr., C. M. Callahan, J. P. Dines (Chair), K. M. Dudzinski, H. H. Edwards, M. S. Leslie, T. J. McIntyre, D. K. Odell, C. W. Potter, S. Sheffield, E. E. Smith.

Mission:

The Marine Mammals Committee was formed in 1921 and Chaired by E. W. Nelson. It is the longest-standing active Committee of the American Society of Mammalogists. Its mission is to maintain and encourage interest in marine mammals in the ASM, to provide the Society Membership with information about marine mammalogy, including conservation and legislative issues, to spearhead resolutions and legislation involving marine mammals, and to serve as a liaison between ASM and the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM). Members of the Marine Mammals Committee are frequently active in both ASM and the Society for Marine Mammals.

Information Items:

(1) Two members rotated off the Committee this year: Joy Lapsertis and Thomas O'Shea. We thank them for their valuable service.

(2) Members of the Committee monitored many issues pertinent to the Committee's mission, including these highlights:

(A) Update on the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*)

We reported last year that the population of the vaquita, a small porpoise endemic to the northern waters of the Gulf of California, was estimated to be as low as 30 individuals. In a desperate effort to save the species from certain extinction, marine mammal biologists in October 2017 attempted to capture a few vaquitas for a captive breeding project. The first effort did not go well and the project was cancelled. Latest estimates (March 2017) indicate the remaining population of vaquitas may be down to as few as 12-20 individuals. Vaquitas continue to die in illegal gill nets set for the also endangered totoaba.

(B) Status of the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*)

At least 17 North Atlantic right whales died in 2017 and another one was found dead in early 2018. After many decades of slowly increasing numbers, the population of this species is taking a turn for the worse. Even with conservation measures such as mandatory decreased ship speeds in high traffic areas, the biggest remaining threats to these whales are ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear. In more bad news, no newborns were counted in the recently ended calving season (March 2017). The current population is estimated at 400-500.

(C) Funding for federal agencies with responsibility for marine mammals

The administration's 2018 proposed federal budget eliminated the Marine Mammal Commission, an independent federal agency that provides oversight of policy and other actions affecting marine mammals. In August 2017, ASM President Robert Sikes signed a letter that was sent to 17 Senators and Representatives on their respective appropriation committees, urging that

funding be restored to the Marine Mammal Commission. Ultimately, Congress rejected the administration's proposal to eliminate MMC and approved a budget that provided level funding for the MMC for fiscal year 2018.

(3) Like all federal agencies with oversight of natural resources, the agencies with purview over marine mammals—including the MMC and the National Marine Fisheries Service--were threatened with devastating funding cuts in the administration's proposed budget for 2019. Congress again rejected the administration's proposal to eliminate the Marine Mammal Commission as well as the proposed funding cuts to the National Marine Fisheries Service and many federal programs important to the protection and conservation of, and research on marine mammals.

Action Items: None.

Respectfully submitted,

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